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1st Presbyterian Church

Pittsford, New York

September 7, 2014

24th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Jeremiah 4:11-12, 22-28 or Exodus 32:7-14

Psalms 14 or Psalm 51:1-10

1 Timothy 1:12-17

Luke 15:1-10



**There is joy in the presence
of the angels over one sinner
who repents. Luke 15:10**



***The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not
want.***

Shall not want? Give me a break. I want lots of things. I'd like to have a nicer house, a better job, and a pay raise. I want people to do what I say when I say. And I wouldn't mind winning the lottery either.

***He makes me lie down in green pastures; He
leads me beside quiet waters.***

I have a problem with the words 'makes me.' That sounds a bit legalistic to me. First you say I can't want things; now you're making me do things."

***He restores my soul; He guides me in the paths
of righteousness for His name's sake.***

I don't want to be guided down the paths of righteousness. I prefer the more scenic routes. How about leading me to Hawaii for a change? What about Vegas? I'm getting a little tired of the paths of righteousness. The next thing you know, you'll be leading me through a dark valley.

Even though I walk through the valley of the

***shadow of death, I fear no evil, for You are with
me.***

What am I doing walking through the valley of the shadow of death? I thought I was supposed to be lying down in green pastures. Did you take a wrong turn, or what? And you call yourself a Shepherd?"

Your rod and your staff, they comfort me.

To tell you the truth, a rod and staff are not my idea of comfort. A rod and reel I'll take. A back massage would be even better. Skip the rod and staff.

***You prepare a table before me in the presence
of my enemies.***

Great! Out of all the restaurants in the world, you choose the one where my enemies like to eat. I'm sure I'll relish every bite of that meal!

***You have anointed my head with oil; My cup
overflows.***

I don't want any oil on my head. I prefer shampoo. And for goodness sake, can't you stop pouring before my cup overflows? What kind of

waiter are you anyway? How would you like to have hot coffee spilled all over your hand?

Surely goodness and loving kindness will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever.

I don't want to be confined to a house forever. That sounds like a prison. It might be nice to step outside once every thousand years or so. I never will understand why so many people love the 23rd Psalm."¹

Thanks to Jane Hunter ten years ago who said, "You ought to read this" . . . This is Ken Crockett writing in his book, *I Once Was Blind, but Now I Squint* where he has a fictitious author, Ima Whiner, provide a piece called, "A Pessimist's View on Psalm 23."

It's interesting how many references there are in the scriptures to sheep and shepherds. The text of Psalm 23 is probably the most familiar, but today's lesson from Luke's Gospel is among the best known of the stories – more so than our exploration of the I AM sayings of Jesus during Lent we did a pair of years ago where he said, "I AM the door of the sheep" or "AM the good shepherd." But, today we are going to explore a bit of the short parable where Jesus asked, "Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it?"

There are more than 105 million parking spaces in America, and your vehicle is probably occupying one of them somewhere on this campus. Which one? If you found yourself parking down by the lacrosse field, it may be hard to remember.

¹ Kent Crockett, in his book, *I Once Was Blind, but Now I Squint* (Chattanooga, TN: AMG Publishers, 2004), pp. 34-35 includes *A Pessimist's Commentary on Psalm 23*. The author is listed as "Ima Whiner." It is admittedly a spoof.

Now think Disney World for a moment. Its parking areas include more than 46,000 slots, and every day, a good number of guests cannot remember in which one they left their car. Visitors arrive at the theme park revved up to have a good time, and they aren't paying attention. What's more, they may be piloting a rental whose color and make they haven't noticed, but even if they have, it's identical to several hundred other cars nearby.

Disney employees do what they can to help absent-minded visitors observe where they park. Each parking section has a Disney character name — Chip & Dale, Pluto, Goofy, Dopey, etc. — clearly identified with prominently posted pictures. As arriving guests board the trams that carry them into the park, the tram drivers tell the visitors what lot they are in and urge them to take note. Still, so many people fail to remember that Disney employs a small army called "the parking cast" whose job is to reassure these flummoxed folks and reunite them with their autos.

The parking cast uses an array of tools, including perseverance, GPS technology and clues elicited from the guests. For starters, Disney keeps track of when each lot fills. That way, if visitors can remember approximately when they arrived, the cast can narrow the search to specific lots. Disney workers also ask what visitors remember seeing en route to the parking lot. Often, Disney employees drive the lost individuals around in company vehicles, while the guests lean out the window, pushing the panic button on their key chains, hoping the car will sound off!

Through one means or another, Disney usually manages to re-link guests with their vehicles, finding the lost and enabling park visitors to go on their way. And so the guests do, probably feeling that no matter which lot their car was actually discovered in, they had parked in Dopey.

We don't know if the members of Disney's parking cast have a favorite Bible passage, but the parables in today's gospel are good

candidates.

A pastor asked a college freshman at a school different from Nazareth, "Well what are you planning to take here?" and the student said, "I think I'm going to like majoring in history. It was tough at first."

"The reading?" I asked. "The reading list can be long."

"No, that's not what was tough," he said. "The first thing you've got to do, in order to major in history, is to forget your faith. After that, everything's easier."

"What?"

"Yeah. You find out early, in exams, the answer to a question like, 'What was a major cause of the French Revolution?' or 'What factor contributed to the Great Depression?' is never 'God.' You can't say, 'There was a revolution in France because God wanted it that way' or 'In the Great Depression, God was trying to teach us a lesson.' Around here, the right answer is never 'God.' "

Modernity devised a closed system of knowing. All knowledge must be self-derived, readily available to anyone using our methods of empiricism. It has proved to be a remarkably fruitful way of apprehending the world, a means of reassuring us that the world was our world.

When everything that we know about the world exclusively arises from within our world, we can run the world fairly much as we please. The bloody, bad 20th century is the result. Which I think goes a long way to explain why we don't get much of a God in modernity.

Rabbi Kushner's *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* speaks of a God who cares, but who doesn't actually do anything empathetic but remains uninvolved. Deism, stoicism is about as much god as we can handle, any more god might threaten our stable arrangement that allows us to think that we are in control.

Now, we say this to indicate why we have

difficulty understanding the parables that Jesus tells. It is not because we are sophisticated, critical, early 21st-century people. It is because we live in an hermetically sealed world - flat, predictable, where the only actions are ours and the only future is the one solely constructed by us. Jesus is to us at times incomprehensible, not because he is primitive and prescientific, but rather because Jesus renders a world quite different from where we live.

When some religious folk "grumbled" because "this man receives sinners and eats with them," Jesus told some stories in order to explain himself.

Which of you women, when you have lost a quarter, will move all of your furniture out of the house, rip up the carpet, move all the heavy appliances out in the yard, and, when you have found your lost coin, will run out and shout to the neighbors, "You're all invited to a party such as Pittsford has never seen! I found my quarter!"

Which of you would not do that? I think we all know the answer. None of us would do that. We believe in balance, rationality, a sense of propriety and proportion. Our parties are for the purpose of getting wasted on a Saturday in order to forget the rigors of work or academia, not over something so insignificant as a sheep or a coin.

Jesus told these outrageous little stories about God to those who "grumbled" because of the unsavory company he kept. I wonder if our grumbling against Jesus has a different source. How do we like this God who won't stay where we've put him? This God who relentlessly reaches, intrudes, seeks, and saves? "I'm searching for something spiritual in my life," we say. "I've been experimenting with various forms of spirituality," we say.

Modernity has convinced us that our lives are our own. We are the authors of our fate, captains of our souls. Jesus parabolically portrays a God who lovingly reaches, intrudes, seeks, and saves. Are you willing to be loved by that much of a God?

"Which one of you," said Jesus, "having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it? When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.' Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance."

How beautiful. How touching. And also, how absurd. We've made this point before, but it is important. A much beloved gospel hymn goes like this: "There were ninety and nine who safely lay in the shelter of the fold . . ."

That's not how Jesus told his parable. "Which one of you," said Jesus, "having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it?" He left them where? In the wilderness – to fend for themselves – possibly to be exposed to wolves and other predators. This adds an edge to the story that we dare not miss.

A hundred sheep is a good size flock. Surely this shepherd would not miss this one. But he does miss it. That sheep is so valuable that he will risk leaving his other ninety-nine in the wilderness where they are vulnerable to predators to find this one that has wandered off. So valuable that, when he gets home, "he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.'" That is one precious sheep.

But, of course, Jesus is not talking about sheep, at all. He's talking about you and me. "Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance." Where did he leave the ninety and nine? He left them in the wilderness.

Sheep are nibblers who don't pay attention.

It's said that sheep get lost by nibbling away at the grass and never looking up. People are like that. Have you ever been nibbling along one day, and all of a sudden you looked up and thought, "How did I get here?" Some middle-aged people tell me that from time to time.

And sheep are born followers. They'll follow you anywhere.

Mary Alice Dyess of Phoenix, Arizona, wrote to *Guideposts* magazine with a story about her pet lamb, Beatrice. One day, Beatrice broke out of her pen and led the neighbor's sheep out of their field and toward a busy intersection. Mary Alice called for the sheep, but they continued trotting toward the street. In desperation, she suddenly yelled, "Baaaaa!" at the top of her lungs. Beatrice stopped immediately, turned around, and came right back to her own field, with all the neighbor's sheep trailing meekly behind her.²

A new school teacher in a farming community in Texas asked her class, "If there were 12 sheep in a field and one jumped over the fence, how many would be left?"

One little fellow spoke up and said "None."

The teacher said, "You don't know arithmetic."

"No, ma'am," said the boy, "but I know sheep."

Sheep are followers. And sometimes they are not too wise about whom they choose to follow. It kind of reminds us of people, again.

Pastor Mike Milton of Savannah, GA tells about two photos that appeared together on the front page of a local newspaper, the *Camden, Maine Herald*. One photo was of the board of aldermen and the town manager huddled together at a meeting. The other photo was a flock of sheep. Unintentionally, the captions were reversed. Under the picture of the sheep, the caption identified them as the aldermen and town

² Mary Alice Dyess, "Bringing in the Sheep," *Guideposts*, May 2000, p.43.

manager. Under the photo of the distinguished fathers of the community, the caption read like this: “The Sheep, naïve and vulnerable, huddle for security against the uncertainties of the outside world.”³ Rather sounds like a description of NATO last week doesn’t it?

Let’s face it, we are oftentimes like sheep. We nibble ourselves into situations that are too big for us to handle. We follow the other sheep, sometimes unwisely. There we are-- “The Sheep, naïve and vulnerable, huddle(d) for security against the uncertainties of the outside world.” Does our Shepherd care? Yes, says Luke’s gospel. He leaves the ninety and nine. Where? Out in the wilderness, to search for that one who has gone astray. What great good news.

A few years ago, according to People magazine, mechanical engineer Ed Adams got buried in an avalanche. A few weeks later, it happened again. And then again. Is Ed Adams just the unluckiest fellow around? No, he happens to be an avalanche researcher in Montana. Ed Adams places himself in a small shed on the side of a snowy mountain, then he has his assistants trigger the chain of events that will cause an avalanche. From within the raging mountain of snow, Adams measures a variety of factors so that researchers can better predict how and why an avalanche occurs. In his line of work, he has been buried alive twenty times. He deliberately places himself at risk so that his work can save the lives of others in similar situations.

I am glad for people like Ed Adams. He’s willing to risk his life so that you and I will be safer. We must be pretty valuable people if someone like Ed Adams would go to that length to make life better for us.⁴

But that’s Ed’s job. And he’s dedicated to it. But Ed’s risk in his work is limited. If he really thought he would die in one of these avalanches, doubtless he would not do it. Especially if he

discovered that he was going to die for the sake of a bunch of dumb sheep. I mean, get real.

It is not like the police who patrol our communities, or Dr. Kent Brantley who risked contracting Ebola to minister to very sick people who had, or teams of people who risked getting the disease to focus energy on Dr. Brantley. In an interview with Matt Lauer that was aired this weekend, Dr. Brantley said that being healed of Ebola was a miracle from God . . . not that God had singled him out as compared with others, but because God had somehow used the medical team on the East Coast of Africa, an experimental drug, a flight crew on a plane, the medical team at Emory University, and thousands of people in prayer that had somehow brought energy to bear for his healing. A lot of God movement for one sheep, I’d say.

But listen. Here’s the gospel. St. Paul writes in Romans 5: “For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. Indeed, rarely will anyone die for a righteous person--though perhaps for a good person someone might actually dare to die. But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us.” (6-8) What an amazing thought! We matter so much to the Creator of this universe, that Christ gave himself in our behalf.

I read about a courageous man. Robert “Bobo” Bonadies was president of Connecticut Parachutists Inc. As president of this club he had conducted thousands of jumps from airplanes, and had instructed hundreds of students in the art of skydiving. He had a reputation for giving confidence to even the most timid students.

But in May 2002, one of his jumps went horribly wrong. Bonadies was jumping with a new student named Cindy Hyland. Hyland had successfully completed two jumps under Bonadies’ guidance. But on this day, Hyland lost the rip cord to her parachute. To protect her, Robert Bonadies grabbed hold of Hyland and held on, stabilizing her so she could untangle her rip cord. He knew at some point that he would have to let her go if he were to save himself.

³ *Great Preaching 2001*, edited by Michael Duduit and Jonathan Kever, The Preaching Library, Jackson, TN, 2000, p. 30.

⁴ “A Snow Job,” January 12, 2004, p.86.

With Bonadies' help, Hyland's parachute finally opened. But Robert Bonadies ran out of time. He died instantly in the fall.

In 2003, the Carnegie Hero Fund Commission named Robert Bonadies as a recipient of their Hero Award. Robert Bonadies knew the challenges and risks of skydiving. He knew the choice he was being asked to make. And when the time came, he chose to give his own life to save the life of another.⁵

What do you do when you discover that someone has given his or her life to save you? Do you take it for granted? Do you say, "Ho, hum, what I do with my life doesn't matter?" Or do you get off somewhere by yourself for a few moments, and lift your face toward heaven and say, "Lord, I never thought my life was worth that much, that someone should die in my behalf. Help me somehow to be worthy."

How much does God love you? He left the ninety and nine. Where? In the wilderness. To find the one lost sheep that had gone astray.

⁵ "Falling" by Lynn Rosellini, *Reader's Digest*, October 2003, pp. 104-109.